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Watt's other focus: San Pedro

[Watt, from D1]

character named Pelican-man in "The Secondman's Middle Stand," the second of three operas Watt has composed and recorded.

"Pelicans have no song," Watt says, the recently restored Angel's Gate lighthouse rising like a black-and-white sentinel behind him. "Except when they're young, they're mostly silent. Sometimes, you don't need words."

In notable contrast to the stereotype of the silent bassist, Watt is not a man of few words. In fact, he's a bit of a monologuist, a flount of opinions and information — he points out the local landmarks, recounts their history, pontificates about their future. "Spiel" is one of his favorite words.

Though he hasn't exactly fronted the bands for which he's most famous, he hasn't been the sideman either. Only in the Stooges, the reformed punk pioneers with whom he's played nine years, does Watt hang out in the wings — after all, they've Iggy Pop's show.

And yet there's something in Watt, 54, that's looking for moments of stillness. He's tried to record the sound of the waves from his kayak. But at Angel's Gate, the deep blue becomes the nation's busiest container port; nature washes into industry.

"You would not believe the noise that's coming off the island: the trucks, the cans [shipping containers] slamming down, motorboats, helicopters," he says after a two-hour kayak, over the din of breakfast at the Pacific Diner. "I had to go out way by Royal Palms to find just ocean sounds. Your mind masks it out, you don't notice. I wanted water, waves. I couldn't get anything; it was being masked by the man-made."

Watt turned to a shutter to stop the world. He began snapping pictures when digital technology put editing house ruling like a black-and-white sentinel behind him. "Except when they're young, they're mostly silent. Sometimes, you don't need words."

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Cinco de Mike Watt: Book Launch

Where: Beyond Baroque, 681 Venice Blvd., Venice
When: 2 p.m. Saturday
Price: $7; students, seniors, children $5
Info: (310) 822-3006; www.beyondbaroque.org

chor necklace. "My pop being the chief, he gave me a lot of layers of his life."

It was the mothers, though, who shaped the Minutemen, the band Watt formed in 1980 with his Pedro friends D. Boon and George Hurley. In fact, it was Boon's mom who suggested they start a group. Out of all the bands associated with the 1980s South Bay label SST, the Minutemen seemed the most serious, the most destined for artistic glory, as evidenced by their ferocious live shows and the complex, jazz-influenced arrangements and agitprop lyrics of their four albums and eight EPs. Then Boon was killed in a traffic accident in 1985.

The Minutemen's story was told in the 2005 documentary "We Jam Econo," the title referring to the group's anti-luxury, DIY aesthetic and Watt's infamous van with the Brahma bull decal on its side.

Watt and Hurley formed fIREHOSE, a band that developed a larger following than Minutemen, yet never earned the critical acclaim. Having broken up in '94, Watt's lineup reunited this spring for a brief tour and Coachella shows. While Watt was happy to play with his old friends, he disliked the feeling of nostalgia at the shows — the "old guys wearing tour shirts with their guts hanging out ... Stooges' shows aren't like that."

Mike Watt doesn't rest on his laurels. He released his third opera, with his trio the Missingmen, last year: "Hyphenated-Man" is inspired by the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch and "The Wizard of Oz." He reunited earlier this year with his ex-wife Kira Roessler for the bass duo Dos, recorded an album with members of Deerhoof and Silver Jews, released an album with writer Richard Meltzer under the band name Spielgasser, and is touring European festivals with the Stooges this summer.

When he's not on the road, he wakes at dawn and pushes his short, squat kayak — it's not squash'ysanit, but it fits in his van — out from Cabrillo Beach. He composes as he paddles. "When you're out there, there's no bass," says Watt, whose most commonly cited musical influence is John Coltrane. "You have to imagine your music. It's built from the rhythms of the paddle. ... Composing on the bike or kayak is much different than when I was a younger man with a machine in my hand. You're trying to realize an abstract idea in your head."

On the water, he also receives far eye gifts. Watt calls San Pedro "Malibu with harnesserheads," referring to the cranes that load containers. There's a serenity in Watt's shots, but it's often hard-edged and hard-earned, framed in industry.

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